C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 002105

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL KDEM IZ
SUBJECT: THE LIMITS OF CROSS-SECTARIAN POLITICS BEFORE THE
NATIONAL VOTE

REF: A. BAGHDAD 001925
     ¶B. BAGHDAD 002014
     ¶C. BAGHDAD 001889
     ¶D. BAGHDAD 001744
     ¶E. BAGHDAD 000306
     ¶F. BAGHDAD 000659

Classified By: DCM Robert Ford for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Iraqi politicians are seeking to brand their
parties as non-sectarian amid a whirl of alliance
negotiations before the January national parliamentary
election. A significant cross-sectarian, national electoral
alliance would be a very positive development in Iraqi
politics. Formation of such a coalition, however, will have
to overcome Iraq's entrenched ethno-sectarian voting
patterns, incentives to pander to one's sectarian base,
lingering fears about Ba'athists and Iranian influence, and
anti-Kurdish sentiment that have marked past attempts at
cooperation between Sunni and Shia parties. Given these
obstacles, the most likely outcome is electoral coalitions
that call themselves "national" but in reality are dominated
by the old, ethno-sectarian parties with token representation
from other groups. Those seeking new political allies now may
have an advantage in joining a majority cross-sectarian
governing coalition after the elections. End summary.

Ethno-Sectarian Voting Patterns

¶2. (C) Voting behavior in Iraq largely falls along
ethno-sectarian geographic lines, as demonstrated most
recently by the results of the January 2009 provincial
elections. For example, although backers of Prime Minister
Maliki's State of Law (SOL) coalition tended to portray
themselves as part of a "national" list, SOL received nearly
all its seats from the Shia-dominated south, winning only
four of its 127 seats from non-Shia majority provinces.
Within the Shia-majority provinces and Baghdad, SOL won
merely 26 percent of the vote, albeit a plurality.

¶3. (C) Iraq still lacks a major party with wide national
roots. Most derive their support from specific
ethno-sectarian or regional constituents. Hadba and Sahwa
al-Iraq (SAI), new parties that emerged through the January
vote, are rooted in the Sunni communities of Ninawa and
Anbar, respectively. The major Kurdish parties remain locked
in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and disputed
territories. As Poloffs this year met Faily (Shia) Kurds
living in Baghdad, we found them often pro-Maliki, not
pro-KDP or PUK. The major coalition that most closely
approximated a cross-sectarian list, former Prime Minister
Ayad Allawi's Iraqi National List (INL), ended up tied for
fourth in the January vote, garnering only 26 of the overall
440 provincial council seats.

Pandering to Sectarian Base

¶4. (C) Shia politicians are currently engaged in talks to

revive the Unified Iraqi Coalition (UIC) in the belief that
being seen as promoting Shia unity will yield votes from
Iraq's Shia majority (ref A). MPs Ali al-Alaq (Da'wa) and Abd
al-Hadi al-Hassani (Da'wa Tanzim) on July 27 told Poloff that
Shia parties are concurrently focused on how to rebrand the
new UIC as non-sectarian, such as renaming the UIC the
National Iraqi Coalition. MP Abbas al-Bayati (UIC
independent) told Poloff on July 16 that any new UIC would
have to make policy changes to attract liberal Shia and
non-Shia parties. Shia MPs admit, however, the primary
objective of UIC negotiations is to bring the original Shia
Islamist parties back together. Only later will the door be
truly opened to Sunni or Kurdish groups, who will likely have
to join (if they choose to do so) on Shia-dictated terms.
MPs, including Alaq and Hassani, also admit that during talks
QMPs, including Alaq and Hassani, also admit that during talks
to revive the UIC, the most important issues -- divvying up
seat allocation and selecting new leadership -- have been set
aside for now, giving credence to claims by our Da'wa
contacts that talk of a reconstituted UIC is only for "media
purposes." Shia parties, irrespective of their electoral
strategy, understand they will lose support among their
constituents if blamed for causing an intra-Shia schism.

¶5. (C) MP Qasim Daoud, a member of the UIC, told Poloffs on
July 28 that he is advocating a "super coalition," to include
the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) and the two major Kurdish
parties, to run together in the January election. Daoud
said, however, many in the UIC are resisting this idea and
complications have emerged over how to allocate among the
ethno-sectarian parties the seats won in the mixed provinces
of Baghdad, Salah al-Din, and Diyala.

Animosities Linger: Ba'athists and Iranian Pawns
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¶6. (C) To emerge as a national force, any Sunni-Shia
electoral coalition will have to overcome persistent fears of
Ba'athist and Iranian meddling. Shia clerics and officials
this month in the media, through sermons, and in private
conversations with Poloffs have expressed misgivings that the
United States may be open to the revival of the Ba'ath Party
(ref C), citing in particular news report of U.S.
"negotiations" with the Political Council for Iraqi
Resistance (PCIR). Qasim Daoud, the UIC MP, told Poloffs that
even Grand Ayatollah Sistani had expressed concern to him
about the U.S. meeting "insurgents" -- that is, the PCIR --
in Turkey this spring. The public flare-up over the past two
weeks over these U.S.-PCIR meetings demonstrates that Iraq's
Shia politicians believe playing up and denouncing the Sunni
threat remain a useful political tactic. Similarly, some
Shia leaders fear that taking a softer line on national
reconciliation efforts might appeal to Sunnis but risks
alienating their ethno-sectarian base.

¶7. (C) Sectarian animosities also give some Sunnis pause in
considering alliances with Shia leaders. The head of the
Sunni waqf, Ahmed Abd al-Gaffour al-Samarrai, on July 22 told
Charge and Poloffs that his new "nationalist" party would be
open to aligning with Maliki if the prime minister were to
offer an attractive national program. Abd al-Gaffour then
whispered to Charge, "I don't trust Maliki. Deep down, he is
incredibly sectarian." Sunni MP hardliner Salih al-Mutlaq
similarly told Poloffs this month that he cannot align with
Maliki (and assumedly other Shia-dominated parties) because
his constituents perceive Maliki as sectarian and an ally of
Iran. However, Mutlaq subsequently has told Poloffs that he
remains in discussion with Maliki's Da'wa party.

¶8. (C) Despite ongoing UIC negotiations, Maliki's close
advisors tell us he seeks to build upon his State of Law
(SOL) coalition and set aside some Shia Islamist parties.
Maliki has benefited from the "law and order" reputation he
gained after 2008 security operations in Basrah, Baghdad,

Maysan, and Diyala. The middle class in Baghdad in particular
credits Maliki with providing security that could spur
economic growth (ref D). To expand SOL's electoral reach into
Sunni areas, Maliki met Sahwa al-Iraq (SAI) leader Ahmed
al-Rishawi (aka Abu Risha) and other Anbar sheikhs on July 6
near Ramadi. Abu Risha told Iraqi media on July 28 that he
wanted to join Maliki's coalition, because the PM "stood up
against...sectarian violence, militias and al-Qaeda."

"National List"--Anti-Kurd Overtones

¶9. (C) Talk of a "nationalist list," when not an attempt to
re-brand the UIC, may be code for seeking a Shia-Sunni
political alliance built on a particular unifying issue: a
desire to check perceived Kurdish autonomy and expansion into
disputed territories. Maliki probably gleaned from provincial
elections that pushing the Kurds and exerting central
government authority wins votes. On July 29, KRG President
Masoud Barzani and KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani both
stressed to visiting SecDef Gates that they fear Maliki and
other Iraqi Arab political leaders will whip up anti-Kurd
sentiment as an election tactic.

¶10. (C) From the north, Hadba co-founder Osama al-Nujayfi
told us on July 27 that his party is seeking to broaden its
appeal from its Ninewa stronghold by moving into other Sunni
dominated provinces, as well as Kirkuk and Baghdad. Hadba won
Qdominated provinces, as well as Kirkuk and Baghdad. Hadba won
a majority of seats in Ninewa during provincial elections
largely by tapping into Arab anger against the Kurds (ref E
and F), and probably will use the same strategy for the
national election. While expressing reservations about Iraq's
Shia political parties, Nujayfi said he was talking to Shia
groups about forming an alliance emphasizing Iraq's "Arab
identity."

The Exception: Allawi Plus Some Fractured Sunnis
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¶11. (C) Iraq's Sunnis remain mostly splintered among
Islamists and secularists. The Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP)
Secretary General Osama Tikriti told Poloff in early July
that he realized his party needed to expand its base to
include more secularists if it is to perform well in the
January elections. He also noted, however, that efforts at
intra-Sunni reconciliation were not going well. Tikriti's
point was amplified when Salih al-Mutlaq, leader of the Sunni
Iraqi Front for National Dialogue (IFND), told Poloffs,
"Never!" when asked if he would ally with the IIP.

¶12. (C) In fact, rather than seeking a united Sunni front,

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some former IIP members are exploring cross-sectarian
alliances with Shia groups. Deputy Prime Minister Rafi
al-Issawi, chanting the secular national mantra, told Poloff
he is talking to Hadba (Sunni), Allawi's INL (mixed), IFND
(Sunni), and Interior Minister Jawad Bulani's rather weak
Constitution Party (Shia) about an electoral coalition.
Nujayfi, the Hadba member, confirmed to us he is considering
an alliance with this currently disjointed group. Many of the
leading Sunnis, however, are bargaining from a position of
apparent weakness because of their internecine competition.

¶13. (C) Moreover, in contrast with 2005, Grand Ayatollah
Sistani (Iraq's preeminent Shia cleric) may be more reluctant
to advocate formation of a unified Shia list. According to MP
Qasim Daoud, Sistani said in private that he would not push a
particular electoral alliance or encourage voters to select a
specific list. Daoud told us Sistani stated he would
intervene in the election only to discourage the selection of
incompetent candidates. Daoud also corroborated Sistani's
support for open list elections that allow voters to select
the best qualified candidates. (Note: As reported ref B,
Iraqi Government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said Sistani had

told him the same thing. End note.)

Comment: Compromise Needed for Government Formation
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¶14. (C) The barriers to an electoral alliance that truly
transcends sectarian representation are formidable,
especially as the age-old tactic of stoking fear and sowing
external suspicion remain potent. Nevertheless, the trend
towards branding one's party as "national" and non-sectarian,
even if for purely PR purposes for now, represents a positive
development in Iraqi politics. Moreover, some parties in
parliament this year demonstrated significant cooperation on
issues of common concern. The Shia Islamic Supreme Council of
Iraq (ISCI), IIP and the Kurds, for example, rallied together
multiple times to exert greater legislative heft against the
Prime Minister's Office. MP Qasim Daoud and ISCI MP Jalal
al-Din al-Saghir predict this ISCI-IIP-Kurdish grouping will
reemerge after the election even if they campaign against
each other.

¶15. (C) Comment continued: If parties pander too far to their
respective ethno-sectarian base during the election campaign,
there is a danger these issue-based groupings may become
harder to sustain. However, Iraqi political leaders,
including PM Maliki, understand that no one party and no one
ethno-sectarian group can govern Iraq alone. We can help
temper the most extreme electoral tactics by reminding Iraqi
officials that compromise will be needed during next year's
government formation and that focusing one's message on
providing services -- not sectarianism -- is a winning
electoral strategy. End comment.
HILL